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## SOCIAL FORCES AND INTERNATIONAL ETHICS.

HOWARD C. WARREN.

IN EXAMINING the attitude of thinking men toward the present war, one is struck by the prominence given to ethical considerations. A mass of books, magazine articles, pamphlets, and editorials have been written in the endeavor to fix the responsibility for beginning the war, or to establish the guilt of one side or the other in its actions during the conflict.

Among the belligerents, writers belonging to one group of Powers inveigh against their adversaries for violating a solemn treaty and invading an unoffending neutral nation, or indict them for barbarous modes of warfare. Those of the other group condemn their opponents for illegal blockades or for interference with neutral mails and commerce on the high seas. One party claims to stand for freedom and self-government, the other for discipline and organization.

Even thinkers in neutral lands are prone to measure the situation by ethical norms. There is no question but that the sympathies of millions of Americans were definitely turned in one direction at the outset by the German invasion of Belgium. It would be difficult to determine how much of this feeling was due to the broken treaty and how much to sympathy for the weaker nation.

It is obvious that citizens and subjects of the Powers actively engaged in the conflict see the situation from a sharp angle. From their viewpoint certain factors appear distorted; the bearing of some events on the general situation is unduly magnified, while the significance of others is missed completely. But the eye of the neutral observer is not at the edge of the field. His perspective need not be at fault, like that of the combatants. Nevertheless we find almost as much disagreement in discussing the ethical aspects of the war on this side of the water as abroad.

A pamphlet recently issued by a number of prominent Americans residing abroad illustrates at once the powerful influence of ethical motives in determining one's view of international relations, and the lack of historical perspective which an emotional attitude may produce. The writers urge Americans to abandon the position of moral neutrality. "Can we blame England for honoring her signature to the guarantee of Belgian neutrality?" "Can we blame France for resisting invasion?" "Can we blame Russia, a great state, for championing Servia, a small one, of kindred race?" "The present war with all its horrors is actually due to Germany. But for the two initial crimes committed against the liberty and integrity of small states, the Allied Armies would not be to-day in the field." "The President in his note of last April . . . convicts the German government not only of crimes of the most brutal inhumanity, but of the violation of its pledged word and of deliberate lying in the matter of the *Sussex*." These quotations sufficiently indicate the trend of the document.

Some months ago the present writer in an "Open Letter" to a colleague ventured to express the opinion that our own country was not interested in the victory of either side. He suggested, among other considerations, that the neutralization of Belgium was part of the European scheme for maintaining the balance of power, a policy in which this country has never participated; that the treaty was entered into by each of the several Powers for its own self-interest, and not through sympathy for the Belgians themselves.

This letter was circulated privately among the membership of the American psychological and philosophical associations. The replies elicited might be worth publishing some day as a contribution to the study of individual psychology. They range all the way from uncritical flattery to scandalized expostulation.<sup>1</sup> The chief point of interest in the present connection is that the men addressed were all by profession students of human nature, investigators of

<sup>1</sup>A Scotchman—a philosopher—to whom a copy of the letter was inadvertently sent regarded it as a personal insult.

social problems, or explorers into the underlying principles of nature itself. If these specially trained thinkers exhibit such widely different standpoints, if they are unable to agree on any basal judgment in such matters, how can a judicial decision be expected from the plain man in the street? If preconceptions and distorted perspective prevent the philosopher and the psychologist from studying dispassionately the meaning of the Great War, is there any prospect of a rational attitude on the part of the unenlightened majority who (in theory at least) govern the policy of democratic nations?

A fundamental difficulty in reaching agreement on international issues along ethical lines is the absence of any definite center of moral orientation. What is "chivalrous defense of the weak" to X, is "hypocritical self-complacency" to Y. What is "self-preservation" to Y, is "aggression" to X. So long as we attempt to interpret international crises in terms of ethical values, our judgments are hopelessly at variance.

The only solution to the deadlock, in the writer's opinion, lies in a complete change of attitude toward the great social forces which manifest themselves in wars and in the governmental policies which lead to warfare. If our best thinkers cannot agree as to the "right" and the "wrong" of these social manifestations, it is at least a plausible assumption that the nations which are brought into conflict by clashing ideals *are not governed by the same ethical standards*. If the student of social phenomena concludes that the present war, for example, embodies a struggle between two conflicting ethical systems, it surely devolves upon him to measure the situation from a standpoint apart from his own traditional ethics; indeed, he may find no alternative open but to judge it from a wholly non-ethical standpoint.

As a matter of fact the ethical standpoint has been largely abandoned in our interpretation of past historic movements. The historian no longer pours invective upon William and his Norman hosts for their ruthless conquest of England. In our own land North and South are beginning to join in

doing honor to both sides in the Civil War. For the most part it is only *contemporary events* or those of our own generation which call forth the ethical judgment.

In the present case a moral interpretation is peculiarly inappropriate. Is it likely that an entire half-continent of civilized nations—either the Entente or the Central Powers—should suddenly go “plumb wrong?” Is it not a saner, more reasonable attitude for the social scientist to treat war and all such massive commotions of human groups, whether in ancient or modern times, as manifestations of potent social forces?

Perhaps the best practical cure for the ultra-ethical attitude toward contemporary history is to compare present events with similar occurrences in the past. Let the American who discourses so vehemently against the invasion of Belgium examine the history of our own treaties with the Indians. It is not altogether a question of whether one should deal differently with civilized and uncivilized races—it is rather a question of the inviolability of a solemn treaty. What civilized nation has not at one time or another broken its agreements? And do we not find instances in every generation of the invasion and forcible annexation of lesser states by greater? California, Alsace, the Transvaal are fairly recent examples as history goes. Even the strictest moralist would not expect that a complete regeneration of international ethics could be effected between 1900 and 1914.

The writer would not wish to be reckoned a disbeliever in group morality. The present outcry against national disregard for the ethical standards which hold among individuals, is indeed a sign of progress in the “right direction.” Nor is he quite skeptical of the help afforded to the evolution of national morality by these vehement individual protestations and indictments. The preacher and the prophet are real factors in national life. National sentiment is molded by a few individuals who think and speak, just as military campaigns and political policies are directed by a handful of leaders.

But where international morality is in question, the average ethical teacher finds himself quite beyond his depth. His criticisms and his judgments are beside the mark, because they are based upon a single code. He is bound to the standards of his own nation or his own particular "school," while it usually happens that the several nations concerned are following very different standards.

A problem in ethics is far from being a mere question of the facts. It is largely a question of values. An old lady watching her first base-ball game declared that the home team had the best pitcher, because he hit the bat every time, while the visitors' pitcher usually missed. Her statement of fact was quite correct, but her appreciation of values was wholly at fault. Before condemning a nation for its policy towards its neighbors or for its methods of conducting war, it is of prime importance that we study that nation's *ideals*. Else we are striking at an opponent as reflected in our own mirror.

The fallacy of much of the discussion concerning the responsibility for the present war, even by those who profess to have studied the philosophy of history, lies in the fact that they confine their study to the week, month, or decade before the war started. The German invasion of Belgium, the Russian mobilization, the Austrian ultimatum, the execution of the Archduke in Bosnia were all potent factors, no doubt, in bringing about the crisis. But the effective causes of the war extend back a century—perhaps centuries—before these special occurrences.

The ideal of *conquest* has pervaded European national and tribal life since the dawn of history. This has found historic expression in both *centralization* and *subjugation*.<sup>2</sup> These two tendencies manifested themselves during the past century in struggles for national unity and in colonization; they are trunk roots of the present war. Since Napoleon's time, at least, a contest has gone on between forces striving to form a great United Germany and counter-forces

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<sup>2</sup>How far these impulses also dominate American national development would form an interesting study. We cannot discuss it here.

striving to thwart it. An equally potent force has been the tendency toward building up great colonial empires. The impulse toward external expansion, checked in the Western hemisphere in 1776 and 1820, was later renewed in Asia and Africa; it has been a leading motive in international politics for at least the past thirty years. To the student of history these ideals, these modes of expressing them, and the international friction to which they have unavoidably led, made the Great War of 1914 highly probable *some time* during the present generation. It is perhaps too much to say that the war was inevitable. But the situation is not unlike that of a vehicle standing on a railroad track. It invites collision.

Tracing the path of events further and further back into the haze of time, it seems a mere waste of breath—or ink—to discuss the responsibility of individual nations for beginning the present war. When an avalanche overwhelms and demolishes a chalet, it is of little moment to determine which stone struck the roof first. The attempts to distribute praise and blame in just measure among the Powers belong to by-gone generations. They smack of the age when Xerxes lashed the contumacious waves and happy parents gave thank-offerings to Juno Lucina.

International conflicts are not so much moral events as they are the clashing of social forces. Their true significance can only be appreciated from this viewpoint. The two contending forces in the present war seem to be *organization* and *individualism*. We of the Anglo-Saxon race are historically predisposed toward individual liberty; this accounts in part for the warm personal sympathy of the average American with the cause of the Entente. On the other hand the war has brought into high relief the marvelous efficiency of German organization; we cannot but express our admiration for the industrial and economic system, and our amazement at the military system, which has made that nation well-nigh invincible. May we not be sentimentalists enough to hope that when peace finally comes the best in *both* principles will be preserved—that efficiency and

liberty will somehow be amalgamated in the social organization of nations generally?

From the sociological standpoint the present conflict shows at least one hopeful sign. If wars are manifestations of social forces, they are likely to persist only so long as one side or the other may expect to *gain some advantage* from armed warfare. What prospective gain is there for either side to compensate for the tremendous wastage of life and property?

HOWARD C. WARREN.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY,  
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